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STUDIES TOWARD A LITERARY INTERPRETATION

OF MEIER HELMBRECHT

by



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A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "STUDIES TOWARD A LITERARY INTERPRETATION OF MEIER HELMBRECHT" submitted by NANCY FEHLER in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS.

ABSTRACT

Meier Helmbrecht by Wernher der Gartenaere is the work of a creative artist with great insight into his own milieu, Germany in the latter half of the thirteenth century when gradualism was decaying as a cohesive factor, and into human nature in general.

To illustrate the effects created by a single individual who leaves his social order, Wernher uses the specific case of a peasant-qua-knight, young Helmbrecht. This presumptuous youth destroys the fibre of society by forsaking his peasant duty to provide food for all living creatures and by contributing to the crimes committed by the already corrupt knighthood. Since Helmbrecht steals from his fellow peasants instead of helping them with their duties, the bailiff metes out corporal punishment worse than death one year before the youth is hanged by his peers. Order, which was disrupted by the knightly aspirations of which Helmbrecht's ornate cap is a symbol, is restored as soon as the cap is torn to shreds and the youth is dead.

Although gradualism predominates the poem, it is not the only theme. Helmbrecht breaks the Fourth Commandment when, after asking his father to buy him a horse so that he can arrive at court in high style, he refuses to uphold gradualistic society. When Helmbrecht returns to the farm one year later, he still refuses to comply with his father's

wishes. A reversal of the situation occurs when the father cannot yield to his emotions and shelter the disabled son who comes to him in desperation.

Since Wernher's messages to his audience were so sombre that he apparently feared their going unnoticed if cast in the usual form of homiletic literature, he employed exaggerated examples, satire, irony, and parody to entertain, without giving the impression of sermonizing. Each dialogue and each narrative passage in Meier Helmbrecht is intended to reinforce the lessons the poet is teaching on gradualism and on the Fourth Commandment.

The maere of Meier Helmbrecht is divided into three sections to depict Helmbrecht's preparations for courtly life, his actions as a "successful" robber-knight, and his retribution for attempting to be more than a peasant. In Helmbrecht's cap, the symbol of disorder in society, Wernher found a framework for his poem. Confrontations between father and son, dreams, and scenes at home make the poem cohesive within this framework.

ABBREVIATIONS

<u>BGDSL</u>	<u>Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur</u> , I-LXXVI (1874-1954)
<u>BGDSL</u> (Ha)	Ibid. (Halle, 1955ff.)
<u>BGDSL</u> (Tü)	Ibid. (Tübingen, 1955ff.)
<u>DU</u>	<u>Deutschunterricht</u>
<u>DVLG</u>	<u>Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte</u>
<u>GL&L</u>	<u>German Life and Letters</u>
<u>GRM</u>	<u>Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift</u>
<u>JEGP</u>	<u>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</u>
<u>MLQ</u>	<u>Modern Language Quarterly</u>
<u>MLR</u>	<u>Modern Language Review</u>
<u>PLPLS</u>	<u>Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society</u>
<u>PMLA</u>	<u>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</u>
<u>WW</u>	<u>Wirkendes Wort</u>
<u>ZDA</u>	<u>Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur</u>
<u>ZfDkde</u>	<u>Zeitschrift für Deutschkunde</u>
<u>ZDP</u>	<u>Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie</u>

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Only two mediaeval handwritten copies of Meier Helmbrecht, a Middle High German poem composed by Wernher der Gartenaere in the latter half of the thirteenth century, have been preserved. From 1504 to 1515 or 1516, Hans Ried, a customs official at Eisack near Bozen, copied various literary works at the command of Kaiser Maximilian I. His finished product was the philologically important Ambraser Heldenbuch, a folio parchment now located in the Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, which contains Manuscript A of Meier Helmbrecht. Manuscript B, now in the Universitätsbibliothek in Tübingen, is the Berlin Codex 2^o 470, a paper manuscript completed in 1457. Besides Meier Helmbrecht, this manuscript contains only Der jüngere Titurel. While the words "Das puech ist von dem Mayr Helmprechte," the heading of Manuscript A, seem to single out the elder Helmbrecht as subject of the poem, Manuscript B is more precise in its designation of the son as protagonist: "Hie hebt sich ain mâr von dem helmprecht, der was ain nar und auch ain gauglâr. amen." These relatively late manuscripts are believed to have come either from the same non-extant original or from closely related copies of it, for they have errors in common.

The scribe of Manuscript B appears to have modernized both the orthography and the metre of his Middle High German

original and to have given his own version of the text whenever he failed to comprehend what he was copying. As a result, most scholars agree that Manuscript A, in which only the spelling has been altered, is the more reliable of the two. Furthermore, the scribe of Manuscript B left out many lines which Manuscript A retains.¹ Some of these omissions were the result of carelessness, whereas others appear to have been deliberate. When, for example, lines 1923 to 1934 are deleted, the moral of the poem becomes a mere admonition to "selpherrischiu kint" (1913) that they will be hanged, as was Helmbrecht, if they insist on disobeying their parent. Manuscript B lacks the general warning to the reader against "junge knehtel" (1927) who, like Helmbrecht, will disrupt the order of society until they too are severely punished for aspiring to be knights. The whole theme of gradualism, central to an understanding of Meier Helmbrecht, is, thus, completely ignored in the colophon of Manuscript B. Considering this important factor in addition to the pride Hans Ried took in his copying, most scholars, with the notable exception of Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen who once owned Manuscript B, have chosen Manuscript A as a textual basis for interpretation.

Meier Helmbrecht was first printed in 1839 by Joseph

¹ Charles E. Gough, Meier Helmbrecht: A Poem by Wernher der Gartenaere, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), p. xii, lists some of them: 21-26, 113-116, 229-232, 245f., 253-258, 324, 355f., 399-402, 413f., 1062, 1292, 1530f., 1715-1720, 1923-1934.

Bergmann in a diplomatic edition of Manuscript A which, according to Friedrich Panzer,¹ contained surprisingly few errors in copying.² Essentially, Bergmann's changes entailed only the replacement of capitals, arbitrarily located throughout the manuscript, with small letters and the normalization of mutated vowels and diphthongs. Five years later, Moriz Haupt published the first critical edition of the poem. Although Haupt referred to Manuscript B in order to make some carefully considered linguistic and metrical changes in Manuscript A, he preferred Manuscript A to Manuscript B. The latter appeared to Haupt to contain fewer technical irregularities than the former only because attempts had been made to perfect Manuscript B in the course of the tradition.

In his three editions of Meier Helmbrecht, Friedrich Keinz was inclined to follow Haupt in rejecting both manuscripts on some points. Hans Lambel, who tried to reconstruct the text following the manuscripts and not Haupt, prudently proposed a number of changes. While accepting Manuscript A as being more accurate, he acknowledged that Manuscript B was, nevertheless, authentic in some places where Manuscript A

¹"Zum Meier Helmbrecht," BGDSL, XXVII (1902), 90.

²A list of the significant older editions of Meier Helmbrecht may be found in Wernher der Gartenaere: Helmbrecht, ed. Friedrich Panzer, 8th ed. by Kurt Ruh, Altdeutsche Textbibliothek, XI (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1968), p. XIX. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Meier Helmbrecht used in this thesis are taken from this edition.

was not. When Friedrich Panzer prepared his edition in 1902, he made the initial attempt to restore classical Middle High German forms in recognition of the fact that the language had developed considerably from the latter half of the thirteenth century, when Wernher composed the poem, until the early sixteenth century, when Hans Ried copied it as a part of the Ambraser Heldenbuch. Panzer published four subsequent editions of his text,¹ which has become the standard edition of Meier Helmbrecht.

In recent years, Kurt Ruh has edited three further revisions of the text² and written a new introduction necessitated by the latest trends in Helmbrecht-Forschung. Ruh considered the basic principles used by Panzer to be accurate but made a few corrections suggested by Charles E. Gough's edition which, with its normalized orthography and copious notes, had been prepared primarily for English-speaking students of Middle High German. In his preface to the eighth edition of Panzer's text (p. X), Ruh stated that he was trying to separate the early New High German manuscript tradition from the original poem in light of Thomas P. Thornton's recently published article on the Ambraser Heldenbuch.³

¹1906, 1911, 1924, 1941.

²1960, 1965, 1968.

³"Die Schreibgewohnheiten Hans Rieds im Ambraser Heldenbuch," ZDP, LXXI (1962), 52-82.

Most of the early studies on Meier Helmbrecht, as on other mediaeval works, dealt with non-literary and technical aspects of the poem. Among these was the biography of the poet, Wernher der Gartenaere, who named himself in the last line of Manuscript A but to whom no other document refers. Attempts were made to identify Wernher der Gartenaere with Bruder Wernher, a thirteenth century poet who wrote Sprüche. Richard Schröder, however, pointed out that they could not be one and the same person because Meier Helmbrecht is concerned with secular customs, whereas Bruder Wernher's works have frequent allusions to the clergy.¹ Carl Schröder also found this identification unwise because Bruder Wernher lacked the sense of humour evident in Meier Helmbrecht and because of significant differences in style and rhymes.²

In addition, there were several investigations into the profession of the poet. Friedrich Keinz thought that Wernher, as Pater Gärtner of the mixed Augustinian convent at Ranshofen, had been an actual witness of the events described in Meier Helmbrecht.³ Friedrich Panzer, on the other hand, thought that Wernher was a wandering minstrel because of his

¹"Corpus Juris Germanici Poeticum. II. Wernher der gartenaere und bruder Wernher," ZDP, II (1870), 302-305.

²"Heimat und Dichter des Helmbrecht," Germania, X (1865), 455-464.

³Meier Helmbrecht und seine Heimat (München: Fleischmann, 1865), pp. 14-15.

apparent hostility toward the Church (780-781), his contempt for the wayward nun (109-130), and his complaint of the lack of courtesy shown to him (208-210, 848-850).¹ Although Richard Meyer conceded that, as a gardener at the cloister, Wernher could conceivably have witnessed the events described in the poem, he believed that this was not necessary to the composition of Meier Helmbrecht and that Wernher was a cleric.²

Another facet of the poem to attract early scholars was the establishment of an exact date of composition from internal evidence. In his Bilder aus der deutschen Vergangenheit, Gustav Freytag claimed that the poem was first written down between 1234 and 1250.³ On the other hand, Fritz Martini concluded that the poem must stem from the period 1270 to 1283, the time of the Interregnum, because of the state of the peasantry portrayed in the poem.⁴ After examining the poem's literary aspects, Friedrich Wilhelm suggested the period 1270 to 1282 because he thought that Wernher had used a part of Der jüngere Titurel, written about 1270, in his description

¹Meier Helmbrecht, 5th ed., 5th printing (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953), p. XII.

²"Helmbrecht und seine Haube," ZDP, XL (1908), 421-430.

³In Gesammelte Werke, 2nd ed., XVIII (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1897), 56-67.

⁴"Der 'Meier Helmbrecht' des Wernher der Gartenaere und das mittelalterliche Bauerntum," ZfDkde, LI (1937), 414-426.

of Charlemagne, Roland, Turpin and Olivier on Helmbrecht's cap and because Seifried Helbing, written in 1282, uses parts of Meier Helmbrecht.¹ Charles E. Gough (p. xvi) dates the poem in the 1260's. Mention of Neidhart as being dead (217), the use of the Bohemian greeting "dobra ytra" (728), the replacement of chivalry by utter brutality at the courts, and a probable reference to the Sixth Crusade (565-566) led him to this conclusion. Even with today's knowledge on the subject, however, one cannot date the poem precisely because only inconclusive internal evidence is available.

The desire to determine the exact geographic location of the events described in Meier Helmbrecht from the places mentioned in the manuscripts also motivated a number of scholars. In line 897 of Manuscript A, the spring at "Wanckhausen" is mentioned. After following up this clue, Friedrich Keinz became convinced that the Helmbrecht farm lay to the north of Gilgenberg and that he had positively identified such places as "Hohenstein" and "Heldenberc" of line 192.² Max Schlickinger, however, believed that the farm was located to the south of Gilgenberg.³ Konrad Schiffmann

¹"Zur Abfassungszeit des Meier Helmbrecht und des jüngeren Titurel," Münchner Museum für Philologie des Mittelalters und der Renaissance, III (1917-1918), 226-228.

²Meier Helmbrecht und seine Heimat, pp. 10-11.

³Der Helmbrechtshof und seine Umgebung, Jahresbericht des Museums Francisco-Carolinum in Linz, LI (1893), II.

maintained that place names were altered even in Manuscript A and that the events of the poem must have taken place in Lower Austria.¹ Gough (p. xvi) considered Wanghausen to be the only definite place mentioned and the scene of action in Manuscript A to be, therefore, the "Innviertel", which belonged to Bavaria until the eighteenth century but which is now the outlying western part of Upper Austria. Manuscript B, according to Gough, assigns the locality of the poem to the Traungau in Upper Austria. For the spring at Wanghausen, it substitutes that of Leubenbach, owned by Lienhart Mewrll, the scribe's patron. Bruno Friedrich Steinbruckner has recently concluded that the events took place southeast of Wanghausen and that Wernher der Gartenaere, a knight with freehold rights, actually was "Augenzeuge des grauenhaften Geschehens."² Since Hans Ried had no known reason for altering place names, it is generally believed that the scribe of Manuscript B changed them to please his patron.

There was also considerable speculation concerning the historicity of the events described in the poem. Many early scholars such as Keinz, who believed that he had found the actual house in which Helmbrecht had lived,³ and Ludwig

¹"Studien zum Helmbrecht," BGDSL, XLII (1917), 1-17.

²"Dichter und Schauplatz des Helmbrecht," Euphorion, LXII (1968), 378-384.

³Meier Helmbrecht und seine Heimat, p. 9.

Pfannmüller, who was impressed by the realism he found in the poem, thought that Meier Helmbrecht was based on actual fact.¹ On the other hand, Wilhelm Braune² and Friedrich Panzer³ were of the opinion that Wernher based his story not upon history but upon Neidhart von Reuenthal's Hildemar, a poem about a peasant dandy. Gustav Ehrismann believed it likely that the basic outlines of the poem and some of the smaller observations actually took place as Wernher described them but that this basic framework of original facts was supplemented by details which he found in other literary works.⁴ It seems to me that "hie wil ich sagen waz mir geschach, / daz ich mit mīnen ougen sach" (7-8), the couplet often cited by scholars as proof that the events are true, was merely a poetic convention and that this poem, like all others, is a combination of fact, interpretation of fact, the background of the poet, and imagination.

Sociological and historical reflections as seen in Meier Helmbrecht also aroused the interest of scholars, who often failed to appreciate the literary aspects of the work. Fritz Martini saw the poem as a reaction against the new

¹"Meier-Helmbrecht-Studien II," BGDSL, XLIII (1917), 549-551.

²"Helmbrechts Haube," BGDSL, XXXIII (1906-1907), 555-559.

³"Zum Meier Helmbrecht," BGDSL, XXXIV (1908), 391-398.

⁴Geschichte der deutschen Literatur bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters: Die mittelhochdeutsche Literatur, II, 2 (München: C. H. Beck, 1935), 101-106.

class system, in which the peasant lost his right to bear arms. When class order broke down completely and impoverished knights degenerated to highwaymen, the literary image of this degeneration became the thieving knight and the rebellious peasant as portrayed in Meier Helmbrecht.¹ In the same vein, A. Bastow sought to elucidate the customs outlined in Meier Helmbrecht by pointing out that pagan practices were still underlying nominal Christianity among the peasantry in thirteenth century Germany.² Clair Hayden Bell, the only person to translate the poem into English,³ also considered the poem of great "value in its description of social conditions and in its cultural content in general."⁴ Achim Bonawitz went back to the laws and social conventions of the times in order to explain Helmbrecht's crimes.⁵

The versification of Meier Helmbrecht was also studied. In his dissertation on the subject, J. Helsig worked on the principle of heavily accented syllables.⁶ Carl von Kraus

¹Martini, ZfDkde, LI (1937), 414-416.

²"Peasant Customs and Superstitions in Thirteenth Century Germany," Folklore, XLVII (1936), 313-328.

³Peasant Life in Old German Epics (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1931), pp. 37-89.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. V.

⁵"Helmbrecht's Violation of 'Karles Reht'," Monatshefte, LVI (1964), 177-182.

⁶"Metrik und Stilistik im 'Meier Helmbrecht'" (Diss., Leipzig, 1892).

published an extensive list of metrical "corrections" of Panzer's first edition of the poem.¹ According to Kraus, Wernher, unlike Panzer, did not cut unaccented syllables short or use hiatus.² Kraus blames the scribes for most of the imperfections in the text. Before the publication of his second edition of the poem in 1906, Panzer refuted the nearly two hundred corrections Kraus made in his text. One-half of them seemed to Panzer to be based upon mere conjecture. Furthermore, Kraus changed the order of lines in order to make his theory appear practicable. Panzer also criticized Kraus's use of Manuscript B, the scribe of which, Panzer contended, had worked hard on his manuscript in order to make the metrics, relatively unpolished in the original, seem smooth.³ In an article on the Strassburg Manuscript, Ludwig Pfannmüller followed Panzer in rejecting Kraus's theory that the metrics of Meier Helmbrecht should be smooth.⁴ Charles E. Gough pointed out that both manuscripts of Meier Helmbrecht involved linguistic changes which made exact transliteration impossible. Furthermore, Gough maintained that, since Hans Ried liked full inflectional forms even though they were not always present in the original, irregular lines found in

¹"Zur Kritik des Helmbrecht," ZDA, XLVII (1904), 305-318.

²Ibid., p. 309.

³"Zum Meier Helmbrecht," ZDP, XXXVIII (1906), 516-518.

⁴"Die Strassburger Hs. der Rittertreue," BGDSL, XL (1914-1915), 81-95.

Manuscript A might be merely the result of faulty tradition.¹ Recently, Kurt Ruh stated his belief that Manuscript A was, on the whole, an original version of Meier Helmbrecht as far as versification was concerned.²

Studies on Meier Helmbrecht published within the last thirty years have, for the most part, dealt with the poem as literature. Frank G. Banta, for example, found that the poem has a "balanced and skillfully used arciform construction" with sections which were single and yet integral parts of the total poem.³ Considering the composition of the poem in a different manner, W. T. H. Jackson pointed out that inconsistencies such as those found in Meier Helmbrecht are characteristic of mediaeval literature. The basic outline, he admitted, was firm, but the details surrounding the exemplum of the cap were loosely handled.⁴ Like Jackson, Bruno Boesch considered Meier Helmbrecht a didactic poem but stressed his conviction that it was prevented from being tragic by the poet's adept use of irony.⁵ Also seeking to

¹"Notes on the Versification of the Mhg. Poem 'Meier Helmbrecht'," PLPLS, VI (1944), 125-135.

²"Der ursprüngliche Versbestand von Wernhers 'Helmbrecht'," ZDP, LXXXVI (Sonderheft 1967), 3-14.

³"The Arch of Action in Meier Helmbrecht," JEGP, LXIII (1964), 696-711.

⁴"The Composition of Meier Helmbrecht," MLQ, XVIII (1957), 44-58.

⁵"Die Beispielerzählung vom Helmbrecht," DU, XVII, 2 (1965), 36-47.

determine the genre of Meier Helmbrecht, Herbert Kolb reached the conclusion that it was epic-dramatic in nature and originated from the Parable of the Prodigal Son or from a non-extant dramatization of that Biblical story.¹ Meier Helmbrecht was also studied in relation to other mediaeval works. Kurt Ruh, for example, believed that Wernher was so successful in transforming his model, the protagonist of Hartmann's Gregorius, into Helmbrecht that a whole century of Helmbrechtforschung overlooked the prototype.² When Fritz Tschirch considered the linguistic and structural aspects of the poem, he noticed the influence of Gottfried's Tristan.³

Additional studies on these and other aspects of Meier Helmbrecht have contributed to the understanding of this unique thirteenth century poem. However, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the interests of scholars lay primarily in speculations concerning non-literary aspects of the poem. The background of the poet, the date and place of composition, the historicity and geographic location of the events described, and the historical and sociological reflections of the times were studied to the detriment of the poem as literature. Recently, most studies on Meier Helmbrecht tend

¹ "Der 'Meier Helmbrecht' zwischen Epos und Drama," ZDP, LXXXI (1962), 1-23.

² "Helmbrecht und Gregorius," BGDSL, LXXXV (Ha 1963), 102-106.

³ "Wernhers 'Helmbrecht' in der Nachfolge von Gottfrieds 'Tristan'," BGDSL, LXXX (Td 1958), 292-314.

to deal with a single literary facet of the poem and to ignore the rest of the work.

This poem, however, is rich in both literary and non-literary attributes. At one and the same time, Wernher is depicting life as he knew it, exhibiting his talent for entertaining the reader and artistically preaching a sermon on the serious repercussions of leaving one's social order despite the admonitions of one's parents. No analysis of Meier Helmbrecht in this perspective has been made to date. Since I feel that such an overall interpretation of the poem would contribute to an understanding of the work, I shall approach Wernher der Gartenaere's poem from this standpoint in my thesis.

The problem of gradualism is of the greatest significance in Meier Helmbrecht. Although other themes recur, the story centres around the presumptuous actions of young Helmbrecht, a farmer's son who leaves the peasantry with aspirations of becoming a knight. His reasons for, and manner of, rejecting the social order into which God has placed him, the effects of this desertion upon his family and the other members of his class, together with his punishment for leaving his order, constitute the basis of the entire poem.

Within the theme of gradualism, but of lesser importance, is Helmbrecht's breaking of the Fourth Commandment: "Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee." (Exodus 20:12).

This Commandment is frequently alluded to in both the dialogue and narrative sections of Meier Helmbrecht and is even cited by Wernher as a reason for the brutal corporal punishment which the bailiff inflicts upon the protagonist (1683-1702). However, Helmbrecht's actions are motivated primarily by his ardent desire to experience courtly life firsthand. It is incidental that he must discuss his plans with his father, rather than with some other individual, in order to obtain the horse that will permit his proper entry to court.¹ Similarly, his calumny of his mother (1374-1382) is a ludicrous illustration of his desire for a social position more prominent than that of a peasant.

Meier Helmbrecht, in addition to exemplifying the value of staying within one's social order and of respecting one's parents, is a story recounted for the entertainment of the reader, who is at the same time to learn from Helmbrecht's bad example. On various occasions, Wernher loses himself in descriptions and narrations which evoke laughter. Most of this humour, however, reflects the theme of gradualism, for the poet, through the particular and exaggerated case of the dandy Helmbrecht, is essentially satirizing the futile attempts of peasants to resemble the nobility. The gauche attempts which this youth makes to establish himself in a

¹In the course of his dialogue with his father, Helmbrecht frequently alludes to his need for a horse: 299-302, 368-374, 385-388, 416-418.

higher social order are, as I shall point out in the next chapter, a direct literary reflection of the strictly graduated order of mediaeval German society.

Since gradualism, a theme in its own right as well as the underlying factor behind the didactic and amusing aspects of the poem, is at the very core of Meier Helmbrecht, it is appropriate to discuss this aspect of the poem first. Once this has been done, I shall endeavour to show in some detail that the other two important facets of the poem arise from the theme of gradualism and also that the very structure of the poem supports my hypothesis.

CHAPTER II

GRADUALISM, THE MAIN THEME IN MEIER HELMBRECHT

Dualism, the division of all reality into two opposing but equal principles, was important to the mediaeval concept of gradualism. Among all the pairs of rudiments which combined to form the totality of world reality, one of the most significant was that of creator and creation. Although man, the creation, and God, his creator, were considered to be essentially different, there was, nevertheless, a positive relationship between the two. The reality of the creation depended entirely upon its relationship with the creator, for man was nothing unless complemented by God. By analogy, the totality of world reality then appeared "als Organismus, in dem die absolut gesehen unvereinbaren Gegensätze durch Einbettung in die Realität relativiert und als dienende Glieder gesehen sind."¹

Furthermore, each element of world reality was assigned, upon its creation, to one of a number of theocentrically arranged levels. This level determined the extent to which the element in question was permitted to imitate God in its striving for perfection. Since each object was unique and had validity only in its relationship with other members of its own class, it could attain no greater perfection by

¹Günther Müller, "Gradualismus: Eine Vorstudie zur altdeutschen Literaturgeschichte," DVLG, II (1924), 694.

joining a higher level. In such a case, there would be, on the contrary, a complete break in the progression toward perfection.

Members of society, like all other elements in mediaeval Germany, formed a gradualistic order. There was, in the first place, complete separation between clergy and laity. Within the secular world there existed a class order which allotted specific ethical duties to each individual at his birth. It fell to peasants, for example, to provide food for all classes, while noblemen were to protect the peasantry from attack. Furthermore, what was permitted to the members of one class might be forbidden to those of another. This meant that each level was obliged to contribute to the totality of world reality in the unique way which was permitted to it. Since no individual had any meaning when he set himself apart from his social order, change to a new level of reality would, in each case, entail different obligations to the world and, because of this, necessitate a change in the character of the individual himself.

In the late Middle Ages this class structure, which had once unified all facets of life, began to disintegrate, for some individuals forsook their own order in favour of another. As a result, a number of duties necessary to the smooth functioning of society were not fulfilled by anyone. Furthermore, the individual who left the position into which he was born had no hope of attaining perfection on any other level.

On his own, he belonged nowhere and, thus, contributed nothing to the totality of world reality. It follows from this that society would be in a state of turmoil when an entire class of individuals neglected its duties.

Such was the situation in the period from 1270 to 1283, known as the Interregnum. At the end of the twelfth century, the ministeriales, originally a preferred class of serfs, grew up beside the existing nobility.¹ The high ideals which had been associated with knighthood degenerated with time. Instead of dedicating themselves to the protection of the poor and the weak, knights, who were becoming impoverished, turned to robbing the wealthier peasants as a source of livelihood. Once this one class had forsaken its duties toward society, the whole system disintegrated.

The peasantry was, side by side with the knighthood, decaying internally. By this time, the solidification of the once widely divergent peasant classes, begun in the ninth century, had taken away the right of all peasants to bear arms and, with it, the freeman status which had belonged to some peasants. In addition to rendering the peasant a political nonentity, this revocation of privileges dealt him a severe spiritual blow. Materialism became a prevalent characteristic among discontented peasant youth, who deeply

¹James Westfall Thompson, Feudal Germany (Chicago: Univ. Press, 1928), pp. 324-337, traces the origin and rise to prestige and power of this parvenu class.

resented their inferior status and their lack of weapons. When this class became prosperous economically, the younger generation turned toward the knighthood, decadent though it was, for a way of life which appeared more prestigious and more refined than its own. This meant that, in addition to neglecting their duty to provide nourishment for all society, these young peasants were contributing to the decadence of the already moribund knighthood. In other words, they were destroying order from within two classes at one and the same time.

A clear illustration of such recalcitrance, together with its harmful effects upon the individual and his peers, can be seen in Meier Helmbrecht, the story of a peasant's son who loses his life for playing the role of a knight. According to the Deutsche Kaiserchronik,¹ considered to be an accurate reflection of Charlemagne's stipulations for the conduct of the peasantry, Helmbrecht's contribution toward the totality of world reality should have consisted of ploughing the fields and performing other agricultural chores six days a week (14803-14804). The youth, however, haughtily² informs his father that he wants to renounce the plough (571), a symbol

¹ Ed. Edward Schröder, vol. I of Deutsche Chroniken und andere Geschichtsbücher des Mittelalters, ed. Gesellschaft für Ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde, 2nd, unrev. ed. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1964).

² Helmbrecht's pride will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter III.

of his peasant status. Since Helmbrecht the individual can be nothing outside the context of the social order into which he has been born, this presumptuous action must ultimately lead to his downfall.

Throughout the poem, Helmbrecht's social violations are made manifest in various ways, the first of which is his new appearance. Wernher's introductory description of the youth's hair (9-20) reveals that it is blond, curly, reaching to the shoulders, and caught up in an ornate cap.¹ Among the nobility, Helmbrecht would have been in fashion in thirteenth century Germany. It is stressed, however, that he is "eins gebüren sun" (10), and the crux of the whole poem lies within this one phrase. In his overwhelming and foolish arrogance, Helmbrecht puts on the air of being a dandy even though, in gradualistic society, such demeanour, a characteristic of the nobility, was not permitted the son of a peasant. Wernher alludes to Helmbrecht's breaking of this social rule three times in the course of describing the cap (38-40, 54-56, 104-106) in order to impress this point, which is at the very essence of Meier Helmbrecht, indelibly upon the minds of his readers. In addition, the contradiction between the headpiece and its foolish and unworthy wearer is brought to the reader's attention.²

¹A more detailed description of this cap will be given in Chapter IV.

²Bernhard Sowinski, "Helmbrecht der Narr," BGDSL, XC (Tü 1968), 226.

Like his ornate cap, the symbol par excellence of his pride, Helmbrecht's other clothing is out of keeping with peasant attire. Instead of the stipulated black or grey "rupfîn tuoche" (Kaiserchronik, 14792, 14800), Gotelind has the weavers make finely spun "kleine wîze lînwât/ daz lâtzel ieman bezzer hât" (133-134) into a shirt and trousers for her brother. Furthermore, the prescribed length of "siben elne ze hemedē unt ze bruoch" (Kaiserchronik, 14799) must have been exceeded, for Wernher informs the reader:

ab dem tuoche entrunnen
wol siben webaere,
ê ez volwebet waere. (136-138)

The mother, in much the same way as Gotelind, provides Helmbrecht with clothing which his position does not permit.¹ Fur "von sô getânem kunder/ daz ûf dem velde izzet gras" (144-145), which the mother has made into lining for his suit, was not to be worn by a peasant. Nor was a blue coat (169) with coloured buttons (201-202) and bells (213) to be the attire of a person in Helmbrecht's class. These garments are, however, as symbols of courtly life, of the utmost importance to the arrogant young Helmbrecht as he prepares to go to court.

His appearance is still uppermost in his mind during his lengthy discussion with his father concerning his aspiration

¹The mother's role as an accomplice to Helmbrecht's guilt will be discussed later in this chapter.

of becoming a knight. Although Helmbrecht acquired his new clothing only at the time he decided to leave his own social order to become a knight, he cites it as a reason why he belongs at court and not on the farm. Blindly determined to see for himself what the life of a knight is like, the youth fears that the outward effects of performing unrefined farm chores might destroy the image which his courtly accoutrements have given him:

daz zaeme niht zewäre
 minem langen valwen hære
 und minem reidem locke
 und minem wol ständen rocke
 und minner waehen hûben
 und den sîdinen tûben
 die dar ûf nâten frouwen.
 ich hilf dir nimmer bouwen. (271-278)

Since Helmbrecht's shallow understanding of knighthood encompasses only outward appearance and ignores completely the aspects of upbringing and nobility of spirit, he is convinced, furthermore, that no one will detect his peasant background:

swer die hûben waehē
 ûf minem houp̄te saehē,
 der sw̄der wol tûsent eide
 f̄r diu wer̄c beide,
 ob ich dir ie gementē
 oder phluoc in furch gedente. (303-308)

Later, Helmbrecht reiterates the importance he places upon outward image in courtly surroundings:

und sold ich swarze hende tragen
 von des phluoges schulde,
 sô mir gotes hulde,
 sô waer ich immer geschant,
 swenne ich tanzte an frouwen hant. (572-576)

His great pride pushes him to strive for the ideal of refinement, which he imagines all knights possess simply by virtue of their outward appearance and manners. To Helmbrecht's way of thinking, any reflection of his lowly peasant background, such as dirty hands, would lower him in the eyes of ladies and of other knights and, thus, make his ideal of sophistication unattainable.

Helmbrecht, who now considers himself to be socially higher than a peasant, wants refinement and a life of leisure, two things which the gradualistic ordering does not permit the peasantry to have. Going to court, which entails forsaking his divinely ordained social order, is one means of experiencing this desired mode of existence. However, Wernher makes it very obvious that Helmbrecht will participate in this forbidden way of life, decadent though he knows it to be because of his moral upbringing, with enthusiasm and completely without inhibitions:

ich bizze wol durch einen stein;
 ich bin sô muotes raeze,
 hei waz ich isens aeze! (408-410)

His satisfaction with himself and with life at court

is evident at his first homecoming. For example, it gives him great pleasure to display to his parents, sister and household, who as peasants have not had the opportunity to learn any language other than their own, the knowledge of foreign tongues which he has acquired during his year as a knight (714-794). The father, however, in his uncertainty over the identity of this polyglot visitor, refuses him hospitality if the latter cannot prove himself to be the younger Helmbrecht. On the other hand, he promises to treat him like a lord if he is indeed his son (771-794). Alarmed over his lack of shelter for the night (795-804), the youth finally reveals his identity (805-812) and, at his father's command, enthusiastically names the oxen on the Helmbrecht farm (814-831). This incident shows that Helmbrecht, the peasant-qua-knight, is prepared to swallow his pride if doing so is the only alternative to physical discomfort.

On the following day, Helmbrecht takes great delight in describing courtly life to his father in vivid detail. All the decadent aspects, including excessive consumption of wine, lying, deception, profanity, amputation of limbs during jousts, hanging, and theft, are a source of wonder to this peasant's son whose eyes were, up to this time, unaccustomed to such sights (986-1012, 1023-1036). Furthermore, it amuses him to think that old-fashioned, upright people such as his father are ostracized from high society (1013-1019) because what they considered vices in their day are now the mildest

form of entertainment. It is not surprising, then, that after only one week at home he misses his chosen occupation and longs to return to it as quickly as possible:

Nû sprechet, wie lange sî
 der knabe dem vater bi?
 sibene tage, daz ist wâr.
 diu wile dûhte in ein jâr,
 daz er niht enroubte.
 zehant er erlaubte
 von vater und von muoter. (1091-1097)

First of all, he feels morally obliged to vindicate the social peccadilloes committed by the knights with whom he has come in contact. The wealthy man who rode across his godfather's crops will be recompensed by having his cattle, sheep, and swine stolen (1129-1139). Helmbrecht must also punish the rich man who, in a gross breach of etiquette, ate crullers with his bread (1141-1144). A third one will have his livestock stolen for loosening his belt at the table (1150-1163). The fourth offence to be avenged, and the most trivial of all, is that of the man who has insulted Helmbrecht by blowing foam from his beer (1162-1167):

und raech ich daz niht schiere,
 sô wurd ich nimmer frouwen wert
 zewâre und solde ouch nimmer swert
 gârten umb mine sîten,
 man hoert in kurzen zîten
 von Helmbrehte maere,
 daz wîter hof wirt laere:
 vind ich niht den selben man,
 sô trîb ich doch diu rinder dan. (1168-1176)

To this peasant's son, who is striving to be considered a

knight but who lacks insight into the deeper meaning of knighthood, these superficialities are of the utmost importance, as they undoubtedly were to the decadent knighthood in general.

A further illustration of Helmbrecht's enthusiasm for courtly life is his enumeration to his father of his nine comrades in crime: Lemberslind (1185), Slickenwider (1186), Hellesac (1189), Rütelschrîn (1189), Kêfrâz (1190), Mûschenkelch (1190), Wolvesguome (1195), Wolvesdrûzzel (1203), and Wolvesdarm (1221). In the case of each of these individuals, the cognomen, which, ironically, has overtones of the very class from which he wishes to dissociate himself, is shown to be descriptive of his particular criminal activities (1185-1230). One could cite Wolvesdrûzzel, whose name means "wolf's snout", as an example. This appellation is appropriate because the robber in question has keen olfactory organs to assist him in ferreting out valuables:

ûf tuot er âne slûzzel
alliu sloz und îsenhalt.
in einem jâr hân ich gezalt
hundert îsenhalt grôz,
daz ie das sloz dannen schôz,
als er von verren gie dar zuo. (1204-1209)

Furthermore, because he is endowed with a magic charm which enables him to open locks, he steals livestock simply by advancing toward the barns which house it. In this way, the peasant Wolvesdrûzzel earned his nickname as a robber-knight.

At the father's request, Helmbrecht then reveals that his own appellation is "Slintezgeu" (1237), meaning "Land-grabber."¹ His great pride in belonging to the knighthood rather than to the peasantry, which he considers inferior to himself, is illustrated in his boasting to his father: "die gebûren ich vil selten freu/ die mir sint gesezzen." (1238-1239). When he wrongs the peasants by forcing their children to eat watery soup (1240-1241), pressing out their eyes (1243), tying them to anthills (1245), pulling out their beards hair by hair (1246-1247), tearing off their scalps (1248), breaking their bones (1249), stringing them up by the Achilles' tendons (1250-1251), and robbing them of their possessions (1252), Helmbrecht is thinking of the sport and not of the cruelty of his actions. Furthermore, he is extremely proud that he and his nine associates consider themselves strong enough to get the better of twenty enemies (1253-1256). The youth is infatuated with the decadent life outside the social order into which God has placed him. Therefore, he cannot be content to remain on the farm where is hampered by the restrictions imposed upon a peasant.

Since Helmbrecht's deeds are more daring than those of his comrades, it is only just that he should be punished more severely than they. The bailiff hangs nine of the

¹This translation is suggested by Charles E. Gough, Meier Helmbrecht: A Poem by Wernher der Gartenaere, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), p. 49.

robbers who were captured at the wedding (1679) and lets Helmbrecht, the tenth one, live:

swaz geschehen sol daz geschicht,
got dem vil selten übersiht,
der tuot des er niht tuon sol. (1683-1685)

Instead of being executed, Helmbrecht must suffer a worse fate: the bailiff puts out his eyes (1688) and amputates one of his arms and one of his legs (1690-1691). Now he must wander about the countryside, begging for food and seeking shelter from the elements.

Because it is the peasants, members of his own class, whom Helmbrecht has wronged most, both physically and mentally, during his stint as a robber-knight, it is poetic justice that members of this class should ultimately take his life. They cannot but recall past injuries when they catch sight of their enemy roaming the terrain in a defenceless state:

swâ er über velt gie,
dehein gebûre daz verlië,
er schrei in an und sinen kneht:
'hâhâ, diep Helmbrecht!
hâtest dû gebûwen alsam ich,
sô zûge man nû niht blinden dich!' (1815-1820)

According to the ideals of gradualism, Helmbrecht has disappointed the peasants, the fellow members of his divinely ordained social class, more than anyone else. Not only did he leave their ranks, thereby shirking his duty to join all other peasants in nourishing the whole of society, but he

also chose, deliberately, to spend the rest of his life robbing these people for his own personal gain.

When a peasant whose cow Helmbrecht has stolen (1829-1831) sees the latter's pitiable physical condition, he requests the assistance of his neighbours in taking vengeance (1833-1834). These people, in their turn recalling what Helmbrecht has done to them (1835-1873), are only too willing to help their peer punish the youth:

'Dar näher!' si dô riefen
und kërten alle rehte
gegen Helmbrehte. (1874-1876)

First they beat him (1877-1878) and destroy his ornate cap (1880-1895) and long blond hair (1896-1900), the symbols of Helmbrecht's deviation from the social norms.¹ Finally, after the ceremony of earth communion,² they hang him from a tree (1909). The second part of the colophon, a didactic excursion by the poet, stresses the consequences of disregarding the rules of gradualism:

waz ob Helmbreht noch hât
etwâ junge knehtel?
die werdent ouch Helmbrehtel.
vor den gib ich iu niht fride,
si kommen ouch danne an die wide. (1926-1930)

¹ Symbols will be discussed in Chapter V.

² The significance of this ceremony is discussed in Leopold Schmidt, "Zur Erdkommunion im Meier Helmbrecht," GRM, XXXV (1954), 150-152.

People with aspirations such as Helmbrecht's are hereby warned that they may meet with the same terrible fate.

Wernher der Gartenaere sought to illustrate that Helmbrecht's case, far from being unique, reflected the social situation of the times. In other members of the family one can see, albeit to a lesser degree, the same traits which Helmbrecht exhibits.¹ His sister Gotelind is the clearest example in the poem, apart from Helmbrecht, of a peasant seeking higher social status in a gradualistic ordering which forbade this. When Gotelind procures some of Helmbrecht's knightly attire, she is reflecting a desire to live a life which is unimpeded by strict social and religious limits within which an individual may rise. It is she who gives the courtly nun, whose gourmandism is well-known, a fine bullock in return for embroidering and sewing Helmbrecht's elaborate cap and the other courtly clothing he will require in order to be accepted at court (117-122). In addition, Gotelind provides for her brother's shirt and trousers material which, as mentioned above, was not to be worn by a peasant.

Gotelind, however, is more than just an accomplice in the misdemeanours of her brother. Through her own actions, she exemplifies the decadence of thirteenth century German

¹Sowinski, BGDSL, XC (Tü 1968), 229. It will be pointed out later in this chapter that the father, whom Sowinski excepts, is also an accomplice.

society. When Helmbrecht compares the easy and affluent life she will lead if married to Lemberslind with the difficult and meagre existence she would be forced to eke out if married to a peasant (1293-1369), she immediately and willingly agrees to marry the robber-knight (1393-1397) and, through this union, to leave her social order.¹ She wants a high social position and a life free from physical labour, and the idea that she must leave the peasantry in order to obtain these forbidden fruits does not at first perturb her.

However, unlike her brother who is not penitent until he has been mutilated, she rues her rash action even before society, in the form of the bailiff and his men, arrives at her wedding feast:

Dô sprach diu brût Gotelint:
 'owê, lieber Lemberslint,
 mir grûset in der hiute!
 ich fürhte, daz fremde liute
 unz ze schaden nâhen sîn.' (1575-1579)

A wave of homesickness overcomes her (1587-1588), and she fears that she has repented too late of her sin (1599). Afterwards, her stolen wedding gown is confiscated by the bailiff and his men:

Gotelint verlôs ir briutgewant;
 bi einem zûne man sie vant
 in vil swacher kûste.
 si hêt ir beide brûste
 mit handen verdecket:
 si was unsanfte erschrecket. (1631-1636)

¹In Chapter III, the consequences of this conversation will be discussed in terms of breaking the Fourth Commandment.

The poet does not know what ultimate fate befalls Gotelind (1637-1638). However, the reader is informed that she sees Lemberslind who, as bridegroom, receives the slightest punishment of all the robbers, with two cow-hides tied around his neck (1655-1661). She is mentioned for the last time in the poem at her parting, at the crossroads, from her blind and maimed brother (1703-1706). One can assume that she is too embarrassed to return to her father's farm and that, because she has gone beyond the limits of her social order, she must wander aimlessly about the countryside for the rest of her life.

Helmbrecht's mother, a passive and relatively minor character in the poem, is, like Gotelind, an accomplice in the youth's social guilt. As I have mentioned above, she gives her son a suit lined with fur and a blue coat adorned with coloured buttons and bells. She also provides him with chain armour, a sword, a dagger and a pouch (148-154), all of which were known to be forbidden to a peasant, whose sole weapon was to be a fork. Like her daughter Gotelind, the mother seems to be trying secretly to raise her own social status by fitting Helmbrecht out for courtly life.

Furthermore, her very passivity seems to help Helmbrecht realize his ambition. She remains silent during the youth's arguments with his father over going to court, contentedly tries to make his week's respite from his life of robbing as pleasant as possible (843-844, 851-858), and slips him a crust of bread when the father refuses to take him in (1812-

1813). On no occasion does she advise Helmbrecht to obey his father or reprimand her son for wanting to leave the farm. Her noticeable lack of opposition must be taken to mean that she supports her son's actions.

Despite the objections which the father raises against Helmbrecht's violation of social order, he, like his wife and daughter, is an accomplice in his son's guilt. It is he who acquires, at great expense and self-sacrifice (390-402), the horse which Helmbrecht requires in order to make his first appearance at the court in high style. Furthermore, the father, again despite his moral objections to his son's actions, gives the wayward youth regal treatment upon the latter's first homecoming and even expresses his regret that he has no wine (891-892), a beverage which was permitted a knight but not a peasant such as Helmbrecht. The father cannot, therefore, be regarded as a perfect example of the ideals of gradualism.

The father's role as accomplice, however, takes second place to his function as representative of the positive side of gradualistic society. One of his recurrent tactics in his attempt to keep Helmbrecht on the farm is pointing out to the youth that he will find courtly life, into which he was not born, too difficult and too disagreeable. Rather than suffer the pains of being a newcomer at court, the son should work with his father on the farm and attain honour in that way (242-252). According to the father, one never meets with

success when one forsakes one's social order (289-290). Failure, in Helmbrecht's case, would mean starvation and physical discomfort with the even more serious consequence of dishonour (284-286). The father, who appears to have deeper insight into courtly life than does the son, hastens to point out also that real noblemen will take advantage of a peasant-qua-knight. While a nobleman reaps the benefits of Helmbrecht's plundering, the latter will be suffering for having transgressed the law (337-358). This threat, like the others made by the father, is in vain.

Since the father, in general, represents the positive side of the peasantry, it is quite in keeping with his character that he should stress the importance of agriculture. Ploughing, in his opinion, profits both the rich and the poor and is the occupation most necessary to the existence of all humanity (543-560). The son should live in poverty and virtue on the farm, as his parents did, rather than in affluence and crime at court (439-466). Furthermore, the father, who has already disowned his son (424-426), makes clear his refusal to share any glory or shame which befalls the youth when the latter leaves his social order (467-470).

At various times during their conversation, the distressed father tries to bribe his son into remaining on the farm. The first such attempt comes in the form of a match with the daughter of a well-to-do peasant, together with some livestock (279-283). This offer is alluded to

again (359-360) as a contrast to the wretched life the father believes Helmbrecht will have if he insists on going to court. In the first homecoming scene, the father makes his final attempt at bribery by telling Helmbrecht that he may stay on the farm without working if only he will give up his knightly aspirations (1098-1114). This is a considerable offer when one takes into account the great value which the father places upon gainful employment.

Although the elder Helmbrecht's efforts to keep his son on the farm are numerous and quite convincing to the audience, Helmbrecht's desire to experience courtly life, with which he is acquainted only through hearsay, is so strong that nothing can attract him to peasant chores. Only when he is blind and his body severely mutilated does he betake himself, as a mendicant, to the door of his father's house. Helmbrecht's repentance, however, is too late as far as the father's moral and social standards are concerned. Because the former previously rejected the regulations of gradualism in order to live a luxurious life at court which the farm could not afford him, he must now spend the rest of his days being led by a page (1814-1820) until the very peasants whom he has wronged finally hang him (1909).

Although most of the deviations from the norms of gradualism have already been discussed in connection with roles of members of Helmbrecht's family, some minor incidents, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter IV, serve

to reinforce this principal theme of the poem. The gifts Helmbrecht chooses to steal for his family and household (1049-1090) are, although of great significance to a doltish peasant-qua-knight, in actual fact of little monetary value and completely incongruous with the social situation of the people to whom they are given. Although a whetstone, scythe, hatchet, and hoe are somewhat suitable for a devoted farmer, the fox-skin Helmbrecht gives his mother (1068) and the silken band and gold-embroidered lace he presents to Gotelind (1075-1080) were not to be worn by a peasant's wife and daughter. Lace shoes for a hired hand (1081) and a red scarf and ribbon for a maid (1088-1090) are even more out of keeping with the social status of the servants to whom they are given.

Later, in the wedding scene, one can detect the ardent desire of peasants to belong to the knighthood, for the manners of the latter are constantly being aped. The official functions performed at a knight's wedding are among the customs to be imitated: Helmbrecht serves as marshal (1539), Slickenwider is steward (1541), Hellesac is usher (1542-1543), Rütelschrîn is chamberlain (1546), Kêfrâz is chef (1547), Mäschenkelch distributes bread (1550), and Wolvesguome, Wolvesdarm and Wolvesdrûzzel consume vast quantities of food and drink (1552-1556). This, together with the actual marriage ceremony (1503-1534), is a ludicrous and coarse imitation of a refined noble wedding, which serves to illustrate the ardent desire of peasants to play the role of members

of a higher social class.

Thus, Helmbrecht, his sister and his associates, with his parents as accomplices, leave the social order in which God placed them and try to become a part of a higher order. One consequence of their haughtiness is the ridiculous light in which they appear to the rest of society. However, a much more serious repercussion is their downfall, which stems directly from their attempts to come closer to God in a manner not permitted the peasantry. The following chapter will show that this same will to attain perfection in another order leads Helmbrecht and his sister to break the Fourth Commandment.

CHAPTER III

MEIER HELMBRECHT AS A MORAL EXEMPLUM

Some scholars have considered Meier Helmbrecht to be a moral exemplum dealing not with gradualism, as discussed in the previous chapter, but with a breaking of the Fourth Commandment: "Das fabula docet (V. 1913ff.) bezieht sich . . . auf das böse Schicksal von Kindern, die nicht auf ihre Eltern hören wollen. So werden bei dem Gericht über den jungen Helmbrecht Blendung und Verstümmelung ausdrücklich als Strafe Gottes dafür bezeichnet, dass er Vater und Mutter verunglimpft hat. Es geht also . . . um den Bruch des vierten Gebotes."¹ It is indeed true that Helmbrecht disgraces his parents and that Wernher suggests this as a reason why the bailiff, after sparing his life, mutilates him so severely (1686-1697). However, one must consider Helmbrecht's ultimate punishment, hanging by peasants, to be of greater significance.

Helmbrecht has decided to leave the farm for the court before he discusses the matter with his father: "'Min wille mich hinz hove treit'" (226) is the first sentence he utters during the dialogue. Furthermore, the prior acquisition of the cap and the other courtly clothing illustrates graphically that the youth does not intend to remain on the farm. He places so much stress upon the self-image which his elegant attire

¹Helmut de Boor, Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart, III, 1 (München: Beck, 1962), 263.

gives him that nothing the father says in the course of their dialogue, the first indication of Helmbrecht's disrespect for his father, could make him give up his plans. By the time he begins to talk with his father, the youth has such a high opinion of himself that he considers life on the farm, the home of his father and grandfather, to be beneath the dignity his adopted social class has given him. Prevailing custom at court, however, demands that he ride there on a horse. To obtain this animal, he must enlist the financial aid of his father who as a representative of the positive attributes of the peasantry and of gradualism in general tries to persuade the youth to remain within his own social order. The conflict between father and son, therefore, involves breaking the Fourth Commandment, but within the context of gradualism. Because of its importance to a total understanding of Meier Helmbrecht, this theme is worthy of careful consideration.

Overwhelming pride predominates the son's negative attitude toward his father. Early in the first dialogue, Helmbrecht makes clear his refusal to humiliate himself by doing farmwork, which he considers too lowly for someone of his elegant appearance and high aspirations (261-270). The father subsequently points out that courtly life is hard for a newcomer (284-286) and concludes with a maxim: "'wan selten im gelinget,/ der wider ^{an} sinen orden ringet.'" (289-290). To this statement, Helmbrecht arrogantly and unperceptively retorts that his new clothing will conceal all traces of his peasant background and that, therefore, no one will ever

know that he has not been a knight all his life (309-324). Later, he haughtily rejects his father's offer, generous by peasant standards, of a well-to-do wife, many sheep and swine and ten bullocks (280-283) because he does not consider such a life to be good enough for him:¹

g¹ist d^u mir den meidem,
meier Ruoprehte zeinem eidem
bin ich immer verzigen:
ich wil mich niht durch w¹p verligen. (325-328)

Remaining on the farm and getting married is suggested to the son a second time as a way of life (358-360). However, the proud youth, who is still determined to get in among the gentry (363), suggests that other sons, inferior to himself, help his father with the work on the farm (364-365). He, young Helmbrecht, will carry out his own greater plans as a robber-knight:

es m¹ezen rinder vor mir l¹den
die ich ¹ber ecke tr¹be.
daz ich so lange belibe,
des irret mich ein gurre;
daz ich niht ensnurre
mit den andern ¹ber ecke
und die geb¹ren durch die hecke
niht en¹dere b¹ dem h¹re,
daz ist mir leit zew¹re. (366-374)

Furthermore, he feels that his new appearance, which fits him for an affluent life as a knight, makes him too genteel to endure poverty and cold on the farm (375-384). "In dieser

¹According to Siegfried Gutenbrunner, "Zum Meier Helmbrecht," ZDA, LXXXV (1954), 65, this indicates that the father is offering

sittlichen, nicht mehr ständischen und auch nicht intellektuellen superbia offenbart er zugleich eine weitere Form der inordinatio, die dann nur noch Gewalt beseitigen kann."¹

The strength of Helmbrecht's determination to be something he is not is shown again when he mentions robbing people in the higher echelons of society, such as the emperor, dukes, and counts (411-415). He asks his father, therefore, with great pride, for release from the latter's guardianship:

lâ mich ûz dîner huote,
hinnen für nâch minem muote
wil ich selbe wâhsen. (419-421)

Considering his father to be inferior to himself, the proud young Helmbrecht goes on to let him know that the meagre fare, such as sandwiches and water (441-470), on which the parents are satisfied to live in their old-fashioned honour, does not meet his own higher standards:

Er sprach: 'dû solt trinken, vater mîn,
wazzer, sô wil ich trinken wîn.
und iz dû gîselitze,
sô wil ich ezzen ditze
daz man dâ heizet huon versoten;
daz wirt mir nimmer verboten.
ich wil ouch unz an minen tût
von wîzen semeln ezzen brôt:
haber der ist dir geslaht.' (471-479)

to let the son take over the farm.

¹Bernhard Sowinski, "Helmbrecht der Narr," BGDSL, XC (Tü 1968), 232.

Helmbrecht feels that his style of life must be much more grandiose than his father's.

As well as giving the impression that he is superior to his father, a lowly peasant, Helmbrecht commits a further sin against the Fourth Commandment by frequently insinuating that his father does not know what he is talking about. The latter advises his son that, since courtly life is extremely difficult, the son should remain on the farm and lead the honourable type of life his father has always enjoyed (242-258). To this, the son insolently replies: "'lieber vater mîn, / swîc und lât die rede sîn!'" (259-260). He wants to see for himself what courtly life is like (261-263) and, therefore, refuses to help his father plough (278).

Next the father warns his son that, since real noble-men will take advantage of a novice, Helmbrecht should stay on the farm and get married (337-360). The latter, however, illustrates his disrespect for his wiser and more experienced father by disregarding this advice immediately and clinging to his own plans:

Er sprach: 'Vater, swaz sô mir geschiht,
ich lâze mîner verte niht;
ich muoz benamen in die bûne.' (361-363)

Once the son has received what he wants from his father, namely a horse:

er schutte daz houbet unde sach
ûf ietweder ahselbein:

'ich bizze wol durch einen stein;
 ich bin sô muotes raeze,
 hei waz ich isens aeze!' (406-410)

Furthermore, Helmbrecht has the audacity to request release from his father's guardianship (419-421), adding that the father could raise a Saxon more easily than himself (422-423). To appreciate the significance of this statement, one must realize that the Low Saxon people had been considered particularly unruly ever since their forced conversion to Christianity by Charlemagne. Rearing such an individual was considered to be a difficult task, and the very fact that Helmbrecht makes such a comparison is, in itself, indicative of his lack of respect for his father.

His other arguments having failed, the anguished father tries to convince his son that it is better to prove one's nobility by deeds rather than by birth. A worthy man of a lower social order will always be deemed superior to a dishonest noble by people who are not aware of the social status of the two: "Guot zuht ist sicherliche/ ein kröne ob aller edelkeit." (506-507). At this point, the son is asked to choose which man is better: the one who makes the world a worse place in which to live by working against other people and against God, or the one who is constantly striving to help others and to honour God (519-539). Helmbrecht, who has had a good upbringing, chooses the latter. However, the youth is indignant when the father uses the former's choice to try to convince him to stay on the farm and help humanity (543-548, 554-560):

Er sprach: 'vater dīner predige
 got mich schiere erledige.
 ob ūz dir worden waere
 ein rehter predigaere,
 dū braechtest liute wol ein her
 mit dīner predige ūber mer.' (561-566)

With these words, Helmbrecht shows that he considers his father's judgment to be of no value to him.

Helmbrecht's nonchalant reaction to his father's prophetic dreams is also indicative of his insubordinate attitude toward his father. To the first dream, which foretells blindness (581-586), the son replies that it is cowardice to be influenced by dreams (587-590). The second dream, concerning the future amputation of one arm and one leg (591-600), seems to Helmbrecht to be a good omen: "Er sprach: 'daz ist saelde unde heil/ und aller rīchen freuden teil.'" (601-602). Likewise, the third dream, which predicts the end of all Helmbrecht's courtly strivings (603-610), indicates to the youth that he will enjoy happiness in the future:

'Vater, al die trōume dīn
 sint vil gar diu saelde mīn,'
 sprach der junge Helmbrecht.
 'schaf dir umb einen andern kneht:
 dū bist mit mir versoumet,
 swie vil dir sī getroumet.' (611-616)

The final dream, even though it predicts Helmbrecht's death by hanging and the destruction of his cap and hair (620-628), serves only to strengthen the youth's conviction that his father does not know what he is talking about:

Ob dir nû, vater, wizze Krist,
 troumte allez daz der ist,
 beide übel unde guot,
 ich gelâze nimmer mînen muot
 hinne unz an mînen tât. (635-639)

In his foolishness, Helmbrecht can see only happiness in his future at court: "Ungehorsam und Torheit verbinden sich noch einmal in der Ablehnung dieser eindringlichen Warnungen, und resigniert und zugleich charakterisierend muss der Dichter feststellen: 'In enhalf et niht sîn lêre.' (591)."¹ Completely undaunted by all his father's admonitions to the contrary, Helmbrecht then departs for the court (641-648). His failure to heed, or even consider, the warning contained in his father's dreams has constituted a further breaking of the Fourth Commandment. Instead of profiting from his father's wisdom and premonitions, the headstrong Helmbrecht foolishly makes a mockery of this man, who stands for the good in the gradualistic ordering of society.

The first homecoming offers a further opportunity for Helmbrecht to violate the Fourth Commandment, despite the fact that the father spontaneously welcomes him.² Because the youth is still overcome by the sense of superiority he

¹ Sowinski, BGDSL, XC (Tü 1968), 236.

² This passage has caused some critics to compare Meier Helmbrecht with the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I, however, agree with Herbert Kolb, "Der 'Meier Helmbrecht' zwischen Epos und Drama," ZDP, LXXXI (1962), 11, that the comparison is fallacious. Nowhere does Helmbrecht display humility toward his father, unless, as in the case of naming the oxen, this involves personal gain. Furthermore, Helmbrecht, who, unlike

feels over his peasant family and by the pride he feels in living the life of a knight, he cannot resist displaying his knowledge of foreign languages, faulty though it is, before his parents who, as mere peasants, cannot understand them (717-768). Only when he realizes that his lodging for the night depends upon revealing his identity does he condescend to speak his native tongue (795-804).

The son's pride is again apparent when, at his father's request, he enumerates the crimes he and his nine associates have committed (1185-1286). When the horrified father later warns him that the bailiff and his deputies may punish the robbers (1257-1264), whom Helmbrecht considers to be invincible, the latter is deeply insulted. This blow to his pride seems to Helmbrecht to warrant revoking the special privileges accorded his father during the first year of the former's sojourn at court (1273-1276):

manege gans und manec huon,
rinder, kaese und fuoter
hân ich dir und mîner muoter
gefridet vor mînen gesellen vil,
des ich nû nimmer tuon wil. (1268-1272)

As the most extreme form of punishment of which he can conceive, Helmbrecht informs his father that he will also refuse to marry Gotelind to the rich robber Lemberslind, a great favour which he previously intended to bestow upon

the Prodigal Son, has not learned from his experience away from home, returns to court.

his family (1277-1292).

Furthermore, Helmbrecht's impulse to ridicule his father has not been curbed during his year at court. The father suggests again that the son remain on the farm, this time in complete idleness, rather than spend his days and nights robbing (1098-1114). However, Helmbrecht dismisses this advice without giving it any consideration, implying again that the father does not know what he is talking about:

'Vater', sprach der junge,
'diner handelunge
der solt dū immer haben danc.' (1115-1117)

Feeling that he has suffered unduly from his week away from court, he longs to return to it as quickly as possible (1118-1150). Thus, the father's second attempt to persuade Helmbrecht to remain on the farm is futile and, furthermore, leads to the father's being ridiculed by his son, who is again breaking the Fourth Commandment.

Later, in a private dialogue with his sister (1431-1435), Helmbrecht usurps his father's position as head of the household by discussing, at Lemberslind's request, her possible marriage to this robber. The son, who is well aware that his father would disapprove of such a match, attempts to lure his sister out of the peasantry into a higher social order by showing her the contrast between the two ways of life:

dîn leben wirt dir sūwer.
sô dich nû ein gebūwer
nimt ze sîner rehten ê,

sô geschach nie wîbe alsô wê.
 bî dem muostu niuwen,
 dehnen, swingen, bliuwen
 und dar zuo die ruoben graben:
 des hêt dich alles Überhaben
 der getriuwe Lemberslint.
 owê, swester Gotelint,
 diu sorge muoz mich smerzen,
 sol an dinem herzen
 als unedel gebûwer,
 des minne dir wirt sûwer,
 immer naht entslâfen! (1355-1369)

When Gotelind has heard her brother's descriptions, she begs him to arrange the marriage so that she can enjoy the refined, easy life she believes she deserves (1396-1408). The very fact that she lets herself be persuaded to leave her parents and the peasant order shows that Gotelind, like Helmbrecht, is guilty of pride and avarice. Although the life of a peasant's wife is good enough for her mother and sister, it would not be good enough for her. She wants, instead, all the luxuries Lemberslind has promised her (1329-1352). Thus Gotelind, without her father's blessing, plans to marry Lemberslind and to live happily ever after in affluence (1436-1440).

In this same dialogue between Helmbrecht and his sister, both children break the Fourth Commandment with respect to their mother. Helmbrecht, in his eagerness to claim noble ancestry, tells his sister that her father is not his father because his mother committed adultery during her pregnancy:

dô mich mîn muoter hêt getragen
 fünfzehn wochen,

dô kom zuo ir gekrochen
ein vil gefüeger hoveman (1374-1377)

It is from this nobleman, as well as from his godfather, the ignorant Helmbrecht maintains, that he has inherited the lofty thoughts and inclination toward knightly ways that will stay with him for the rest of his life (1378-1382).

At this point, Gotelind calumniates her mother by advancing a claim to noble blood for a reason even more ridiculous than that of her brother:

jâ waene ouch ich daz ich sîn kint
von der wârheit iht ensî.
ez lac mîner muoter bî
geselleclîche ein ritter kluoc,
dô si mich in dem barme truoc.
der selbe ritter si gevie,
dô si den âbent spâte gie
suochen kelber in dem lôhe:
des stât mîn muot sô hôhe. (1384-1392)

These ludicrous claims to noble, although illegitimate, birth constitute a serious breach of the Fourth Commandment.

When the bailiff and his deputies have put an end to her courtly life, Gotelind is too ashamed to return to her parents. Helmbrecht, however, is in desperate straits and, as he did when he needed a horse, turns to his father for help. The latter, who has been deeply wronged by his son, cannot permit himself to give the foolish youth a third chance (1710-1711). Furthermore, the elder Helmbrecht reminds his son of the many ways in which the latter has broken the Fourth Commandment: for example, the use of

foreign languages (1713-1723) and robbing at court (1782-1785). Mention is also made of the dreams at which the youth scoffed:

nû sprechet ob die troume drî
 an iu sint bewaeret?
 noch hoeher ez sich maeret,
 daz iu wirt wirser danne wê;
 ê der vierde troum ergê,
 hebt iuch balde für die tür! (1786-1791)

Because of what Helmbrecht has done to destroy the honour of his parents,¹ then, it is poetic justice that the father, by opting for his own honour rather than for his son's well-being, should refuse the youth shelter.² The only sustenance he receives is the crust of bread his mother places in his hand (1812-1813).

Wernher makes it clear at the end of the poem that his message is directed not only to those people who are considering leaving their social order but also to those who fail to heed the advice of their parents:

Swâ noch selpherrischiu kint
 bî vater unde muoter sint,
 die sîn gewarnet hie mite.
 begânt sie Helmbrehtes site,
 ich erteile in daz mit rehte,
 in geschehe als Helmbrehte. (1913-1918)

¹Gutenbrunner, ZDA, LXXXV (1954), 65, suggests as an additional reason the value the father places on his farm: "Wichtig ist es aber für das Verständnis der Härte des Vaters gegen den verstümmelten Sohn, dass die Auseinandersetzung vor dem Auszug zum Raubritterleben auch Angebot und Ablehnung des väterlichen Hofes entschloss."

²Herbert Seidler, "Der 'Meier Helmbrecht' als deutsches

This aspect, however, is always subordinated to the more significant lesson on gradualism, for it is of primary importance that Helmbrecht leaves his social order and only of secondary importance that he has to disobey his parents in order to do this.

Wernher, who wanted the reader to profit from both of the lessons to be learned from Helmbrecht's fate, went out of his way to make his poem entertaining. The next chapter will point out how the poet entertained his readers so that, before they were aware that Meier Helmbrecht was a sermon, the message was already impressed upon their minds.

CHAPTER IV

MEIER HELMBRECHT AS ENTERTAINMENT

Meier Helmbrecht has been considered by some scholars to be primarily an entertaining tale rather than a didactic poem. Friedrich Panzer has pointed out that the basic elements of that portion of the homecoming scene in which Helmbrecht displays his recently acquired and imperfect knowledge of foreign languages are the same as the basic elements of some particular funny tales based on the same theme. According to Panzer, these similarities cannot arise from pure chance. Wernher, therefore, must have been acquainted with Schulschwänke, which originated in the Middle Ages.¹

Ehrismann believed that the way in which Schwänke, including, up to a certain point, Meier Helmbrecht, present life is a sign of the changing of civilization from the knightly ideal into the middle class way of life, which came more and more to the fore in poetic works after the middle of the thirteenth century. This poem, however, was not a story told merely for entertainment, but "ein ernstes, ergreifendes Zeitbild, das den Hörer oder Leser aufrütteln und bis ins innere Mark erschüttern will."² In this chapter,

¹ "Zum Meier Helmbrecht," BGDSL, XXXIII (1908), 397.

² Gustav Ehrismann, Geschichte der deutschen Literatur bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters: Die mittelhochdeutsche Literatur, II, 2 (München: C. H. Beck, 1935), 102.

I shall, therefore, discuss Meier Helmbrecht as entertainment within the context of Wernher's two didactic purposes.

Wernher has various ways of making his poem entertaining to the reader. Gross exaggeration is one of the most significant of these. Early in the work, the poet displays his knowledge of classical and mediaeval literature in a lengthy description of the intricate design which the courtly nun embroidered on Helmbrecht's cap (26-103). Toward the right ear, Greek tradition is represented by the Trojan War, precipitated by the abduction of Menelaus's wife Helen by Paris (41-48). This is followed closely by mention of the Trojan hero Aeneas (49-53). On the left side of the cap is a depiction of the efforts of Charlemagne, Turpin, and the Twelve Peers to uphold Christianity against the pagan Saracens (61-71). The embroidery on the back of the hood is devoted to the Germanic heroic legends which grew up around the warrior Dietrich von Bern (72-81). Finally, on the rim of the cap, the nun portrayed a dance in which knights, ladies, and fiddlers were participating (82-103).

The entire description of the cap serves to entertain the courtly audience for whom Wernher der Gartenaere was telling his story and to establish a feeling of being in a legendary realm, one step away from reality. However, I do not agree with the statement made by W. T. H. Jackson on the purpose of the scenes: "They are depicted to show that Helmbrecht behaves as he does because the author believes

that the externals of knighthood alone are important, and the more detail he can give the more entertaining the description will be and the deeper will be the effect."¹ Furthermore, the embroidering by a wayward nun of such significant scenes on the cap of a mere peasant is so incongruous that it accentuates the theme of gradualism. The description of Helmbrecht's blue coat with its elaborate buttons and its tinkling bells (178-216) can be seen, in much the same way as that of the cap, as over-embellishment designed to entertain the courtly audience.

In addition to Helmbrecht's clothing, the very events which Wernher chooses to portray are extreme examples of what was going on at the time. Helmbrecht, for example, surpasses his fellow robber-knights in thievery:

an roube wart er sô swinde,
swaz ein ander ligen liez,
in sinen sac erz allez stiez.
er nam ez allez gemeine:
dehein roup was im ze kleine,
im was ouch niht ze grôz. (660-665)

His theft, from women as well as from men, is very thorough, according to the more detailed description which follows (666-689). Later, when Helmbrecht explains to his father that he is called Slintezgeu by his companions, the activities he describes are also exceptional, this time in the physical

¹"The Composition of Meier Helmbrecht," MLQ, XVIII (1957), 48.

cruelty they inflict upon his fellow peasants (1238-1256). Two examples of such behaviour are the pressing out of eyes (1243) and hanging by the Achilles' tendons (1250-1251).

Adding to the entertainment value of the poem is the series of minor breaches of etiquette which, Helmbrecht tells his father, cannot go unavenged (1129-1176). These social misdemeanours range from riding over the crops of Helmbrecht's godfather (1132-1133), which the youth will avenge by chasing cattle, to blowing foam from the top of a mug of beer (1165-1166). Referring to this last offence, Helmbrecht informs his father, in a fit of boasting, that he would never again be worthy of ladies or of bearing a sword if he did not retaliate. Therefore, he will soon deprive the impolite knight of all his livestock (1168-1176). The contrast between this severe punishment and the minor offence in question is so great that the reader cannot but be amused at Helmbrecht's gauche attempts to be accepted as a peer by real knights.

In addition to exaggeration, Wernher employs irony to remove some of the tragedy from the story he is recounting. The discrepancy between courtly clothing and its peasant wearer is one way of entertaining his readers. "Der junge Helmbrecht wird vom Erzähler unmissverständlich ausgewiesen als der geutôre (V. 41), narre (V. 83), gouch (V. 83 und 198), der tumbe (V. 198), der tumbe raeze kneht (V. 106), der gotes tumbe (V. 85)."¹ This peasant stupidity, because of Wernher's

¹Elke Heinke, "Das Märe vom Helmbrecht als episches

skilful use of irony, stands in sharp contrast to the heroic and courtly scenes portrayed on the cap. Helmbrecht, a peasant by birth, will never fit his new clothing because the gradualistic ordering of society will never permit him to transform himself into a nobleman. In an ironic, humorous way intended to amuse his audience, Wernher draws attention to these points, crucial ones in Meier Helmbrecht.

Tragic irony, a contrast to the playful irony employed with respect to Helmbrecht, can be seen in the father's resort to foreign languages when Helmbrecht returns home for the second time. In an echo of the "'deu sal'" with which the successful youth cheerfully greeted his father at his first homecoming (726), the elder Helmbrecht addresses his son with "'Deu sal, her blinde'" (1713). This irony, grotesque though it is, adds a touch of humour to the heart-rending situation of a father rejecting his disabled son.

In another instance of tragic irony, Helmbrecht, who has scoffed at his father's four dreams, recounts to Gotelind the assurance he has previously given Lemberslind of her fidelity to her future husband: she will look after the burial of his body if he is hanged from a tree (1300-1312); if he is blinded, she will guide him (1313-1316); she will take his crutches to his bed each morning if he loses a leg (1317-1319); if he loses an arm, she will feed him (1320-1324).

Helmbrecht undoubtedly tells his sister this in an ironic tone because of his scorn for the belief in the prophetic value of dreams. However, the audience, which knows of the dreams and later discovers that they come true, is impressed by the grotesqueness of the three situations.

Social satire is an even more piquant means Wernher uses to entertain his audience while he is telling the didactic story of Helmbrecht's fall. In the most striking satire, that of peasants aspiring to be knights, Helmbrecht the individual stands for the whole peasant class. His cap, clothing, and actions at court are humorous chiefly because they stem from a haughty peasant's futile attempts to ape knights. Despite Helmbrecht's great efforts to appear as a knight by birth, clothing alone cannot conceal his peasant background. His awkwardness in his new milieu, therefore, always makes him appear doltish. By portraying him in this light, Wernher is using Helmbrecht's particular case to satirize all people who forsake their own order in society for another one.

Gotelind, like Helmbrecht, is a means by which Wernher satirizes the presumptuous peasant. In preparation for her pseudo-noble wedding to Lemberslind, all the necessary items were stolen, some of them from widows with children (1463-1477). The fact that neither Gotelind nor Lemberslind knows how to answer the old man in the marriage ceremony (1507-1528) is one indication that the couple does not belong in such

a milieu. Furthermore, Gotelind's "'gerne, herre, nû gebt mirn!" (1528) indicates a crudeness which is not in keeping with the refined society of the knighthood.

Satire on the clergy, as exemplified by the courtly nun who sewed Helmbrecht's cap, illustrates that it, like the peasantry, was dissatisfied with its position in society. Because of her courtliness, this nun renounced her vows and left the convent (110-111) only to cause trouble in the secular world by making the cap which symbolizes Helmbrecht's disruption of the peasantry. Wernher also cannot resist pointing out that her case of worldliness is common in the clergy, which is, unfortunately, becoming secularized:

ez geschach der selben nunnen
 als vil maneger noch geschicht:
 mîn ouge der vil dicke siht
 die daz nieder teil verrâten hât,
 dâ von daz ober mit schanden stât. (112-116)

As he was in the case of Helmbrecht, Wernher is here criticizing the whole clergy through the actions of an individual.

Meier Helmbrecht is also entertaining in that it contains a parody of the courtly epic. First of all, legends such as the Fall of Troy, the Chanson de Roland, and the cycle of legends surrounding Dietrich von Bern are portrayed on the cap of an insignificant peasant who, what is more, behaves in an unrefined manner even while wearing it. "So ist . . . die schilderung der bildwerke auf der haube erklärlich, wenn man die vielen beschreibungen von bildlichen

darstellungen auf wafen, teppichen und gewändern im auge hat, welche in den höffischen epen sich finden. Solcher pomphafter beschreibungen vereinigte nun unser dichter in drolliger weise eine ganze anzahl auf dem unmöglichen raume einer haube."¹ That the cap of this country clod should be described in epic breadth is, in itself, an indication that Wernher is mocking epic poetry.

Mock heroism can be detected in the description of Helmbrecht's actions at the court. One bold deed after another is listed with great facility and mildly ironic nonchalance on the part of Wernher (653-689). The actions are quite trivial, but Wernher, by his feigned aloofness, draws the audience's attention to them as though they were the heroic deeds of a famed warrior. This adds greatly to the entertainment value of the poem, while at the same time it points out the decadence of the nobility.

In Helmbrecht's enumeration of his courtly companions (1185-1230) lies a parody of the epic list. The people of whom Helmbrecht speaks are outstanding for their time in their brutal acts, but their deeds are completely egotistical. On the other hand, Homer's lists told of men whose deeds, though even more brutal than those of Helmbrecht and his associates, were heroic in the sense that these warriors were

¹Wilhelm Braune, "Helmbrechts Haube," BGDSL, XXXII (1906-1907), 555-559.

striving for the honour of their homeland. Personal gain was not their main concern.

Finally, Meier Helmbrecht is entertaining because Wernher takes pleasure in recounting humorous anecdotes. The minutely detailed description of the cap, Helmbrecht's use of foreign languages at his first homecoming,¹ Helmbrecht's crimes recounted first by Wernher and then by Helmbrecht himself, and the wedding scenes, made ludicrous by the peasants' imitation of nobles, all reflect the great pleasure Wernher takes in telling a humorous story. Had the poet been interested only in recounting what happened to Helmbrecht in order to moralize, these episodes, if included at all, could have been shortened considerably.

By the use of exaggeration, irony, satire, parody and humour, Wernher has composed a poem which will entertain the reader. The basic events he portrays and the lessons to be learned from them, however, are extremely serious and, furthermore, constitute Wernher's prime purpose in composing Meier Helmbrecht. In the comic elements, which are ancillary to this main purpose, lie the poet's efforts to sugarcoat his pill which otherwise may never have been swallowed at all.

¹Jackson, MLQ, XVIII (1957), 54, has this to say about Helmbrecht's homecoming: "It is the formal insult to his parents (not the rest of the household) which helps to bring about his doom. But it is Wernher's delight in the comic which expands the scene. . . ."

CHAPTER V

A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF MEIER HELMBRECHT

For the purpose of discussing the structure of Meier Helmbrecht, George Nordmeyer tried "to trace in detail the fine structure of the various episodes that make up the whole, and elucidate the artistic intent of the author in our analysis of the choice and arrangement of his materials."¹ In doing this, Nordmeyer found various lines in the poem which he considered to be misplaced or added by the scribe and from these made hypotheses concerning the original state of the poem. My purpose, however, is to discuss the structure of the poem as it stands in Manuscript A.

When one considers Meier Helmbrecht in light of the poet's main purpose of illustrating the consequences of forsaking one's social order, one can see that the maere itself, exclusive of the prologue (1-8) and epilogue (1913-1934), is divided into three main sections. The first third of the poem (9-647) tells of Helmbrecht's preparations to go to court. The second and longest section (648-1574) deals with the "success" which results from Helmbrecht's violation of the social order. The final part, Helmbrecht's downfall (1575-1912), begins with Gotelind's premonition that punishment

¹ "Structure and Design in Wernher's Meier Helmbrecht," PMLA, LXVII (1952), 264-265.

is close at hand and ends with Helmbrecht's hanging by peasants, the ultimate retribution for forsaking one's social order.

In order to lend continuity to the three sections of the maere, Wernher used several cohesive devices. The most significant of these is the recurrent mention of Helmbrecht's cap and hair, which are symbols of his deviation from his social order and which also provide a framework for the story. After his general introduction (1-8), Wernher devotes approximately one-tenth of the poem to Helmbrecht's hair and courtly attire (9-233), and they are mentioned on numerous occasions in connection with the story itself. Wernher states, first of all, that he will recount "waz mir geschach, / daz ich mit minen ougen sach" (7-8). This, of course, is poetic licence. Nevertheless, what Wernher purports to have "seen" is a peasant's son with long, blond, curly hair caught back in a cap embroidered with birds (9-15). In this "sight", the description of which entertains the reader, lies the crux of Meier Helmbrecht: the very fact that a peasant is wearing such a cap disrupts the whole gradualistic structure of society:

owê daz ie gebûre
solhe hûben solde tragen
dâ von sô vil ist ze sagen! (54-56)

The son is firmly convinced that possession of an elaborate cap, permissible only for a member of the nobility, proves

him to be a knight, so that the father's numerous efforts to persuade the young upstart to remain on the farm, thereby renouncing his cap, lead only to the father's releasing the recalcitrant Helmbrecht from his guardianship. In the father's eyes, the cap and long blond hair become symbols for the major issue:

sô hâete dîner hûben
und der sîdînen tûben,
daz man die indert rîere
oder mit ûbele iht zefûere
dîn langez valves hâre. (429-433)

In this context, the cap and the long blond hair become a form of curse on the part of the father against the son.

The peasants, before hanging Helmbrecht for his evil deeds committed in the attire of a knight, give him this same warning: "Hâete der huben, Helmbreht!" (1879), an indication of their intense hatred of the cap and of the decadent nobility which it represents to them. Helmbrecht's headpiece is thereupon destroyed, and the embroidered birds are scattered upon the ground (1886-1891). At this point, Wernher refers to the story as "daz maere von der houben" (1894), an indication of the significance he accords to this object. The utter destruction of the cap and hair (1883-1900) by the social class it has wronged most foreshadows Helmbrecht's death at the hands of the peasants and completes the framework begun by the first mention of the cap (14). Order, according to the colophon, is restored once Helmbrecht and

the cap are annihilated, thus making the roads safe again for peasant travel (1919-1922).

Confrontations between father and son, which comprise nearly one-half of Meier Helmbrecht, are an important unifying element between the three sections of the maere. In the first section (9-647), the father repeatedly advocates a specific ideal of which the young Helmbrecht with his insistence on going to court is a negative example.¹ In the second section of the poem (648-1574), the father-son dialogue, this time in a comparison of old and new courtly ways and in Helmbrecht's report of his own actions and of those of his colleagues, increases the reader's knowledge of Helmbrecht's sojourn at court and also provides the father with another opportunity to try to convince the son to stay at home. The final dialogue between father and son, which takes place in the third section (1575-1612), shows the former prevented by his honour from accepting the disabled Helmbrecht. Furthermore, the father here summarizes his son's transgressions against the peasantry, which predominated section two of the maere, and calls to mind the horse and the dreams (1780-1791), which were important elements in the dialogue of the first section.

The father's dreams also unite the three sections of the maere. In section one, they are an ominous warning to

¹Bernhard Sowinski, "Helmbrecht der Narr," BGDSL, XC (Tü 1968), 231.

the young Helmbrecht that he should remain on the farm and within his own social order. Helmbrecht alludes to them in an ironic context when, in section two, he woos Gotelind for Lemberslind (1293-1324). Then, in the third section, each of the dreams is fulfilled in chronological sequence. Suspense is sustained to the end, however, for one wonders at which moment and under what circumstances Helmbrecht will be hanged. Once the fourth dream comes true, the story has gone full circle, for the first section is linked with elements of the third, which it foreshadows.

Scenes at home are another cohesive factor in Meier Helmbrecht. When the story commences, Helmbrecht is at home making preparations for his life at court, which begins in section two. Most of the second section is concerned with Helmbrecht's life as a pseudo-knight. However, an important part of the section is devoted to his brief stay at home. The second section ends and the third one begins with Helmbrecht away from home. Nevertheless, he returns home after he has been blinded and mutilated by the bailiff, to ask his father in vain for shelter. This is one year before he is executed by peasants.

Since Helmbrecht engages in dialogue with his father each time he is at home, Wernher appears to indicate that the elder Helmbrecht is a very important figure in the poem. The latter, who has high moral and religious standards, has engrained these in his son before the youth decides to go to

court. As Helmbrecht's "success" as a robber-knight increases, however, his insolence and pride remove him farther from the divine order his father represents. This means that the poem is a tragedy not only on the part of the son but also on the part of the father, who in section three must choose between moral duty and personal inclination toward his son:

Der wirt hōnlachte,
swie im sîn herze krachte:
er was sîn verch und sîn kint,
swie er doch stēnde vor im blint. (1775-1778)

Thus, the figure of the father, who tries unsuccessfully to save his son from moral and physical destruction, also serves to unite the three sections of the poem.

Narrative intrusions by the poet, which comprise approximately one-sixth of Meier Helmbrecht, are another important cohesive device. The first narrative passage deals with the nun who, after being compelled by her worldly ways to leave the convent (104-130), sews Helmbrecht's cap. By means of this story, Wernher illustrates that the religious order, like the secular one from which it was to be entirely separated, was decadent. The poet satirizes the morality of the established Church, as represented by this nun, in an aside (112-116). Not only is she contributing to the destruction of the Church, however. By making the cap, she is contributing to the decadence of the lay world as well. A parallel may be drawn here to the case of Helmbrecht himself, for he was destroying the order of both the peasantry and the knighthood at the same time.

At his first homecoming, the next narration in Meier Helmbrecht, the youth is welcomed enthusiastically by all members of the household (700-705), including his father. A feast is prepared for Helmbrecht by his household once his identity has been established (859-898). For a peasant celebration of any kind, and particularly for the reception of a wayward son, the quality and quantity of food is prodigious. Boiled chicken (881), for example, was not considered to be lawful fare for a peasant. Furthermore, the father expresses an ironically unpeasantlike regret concerning the lack of wine on his farm:

der vater sprach: 'und hât ich wîn,
 der m̄este hînt getrunken sîn.
 lieber sun mîn, nû trinc
 den aller besten ursprinc
 der ûz erden ie geflôz.' (891-895)

Nor does the father refuse the gifts which Helmbrecht presents to all members of the household, even though he obviously knows that they were stolen by the robber-knight.

Thus, although this part of the homecoming scene may at first glance appear to be unnecessarily long, it warrants the attention Wernher gives it. Helmbrecht's father, heretofore portrayed as an almost perfect representative of the positive attributes of gradualism, is himself shown to be guilty of wilfully stepping beyond his social order. Through this stern figure, who had to refuse his disabled son shelter "swie im sîn herze krachte," (1776) but who would, on the

other hand, welcome that very son when the latter was a "successful" robber-knight, Wernher appears to be relaying the important message that strict adherence to these rules, which held society together earlier in the Middle Ages, is no longer possible.

The next narration tells of Gotelind's pseudo-noble wedding. In order to procure the items necessary for this celebration, the robbers perform great acts of violence:

swaz si trunken und âzen,
daz wart gesamnet witen.
bî den selben zîten
vil unml̄ezec si beliben:
die knaben fuorten unde triben
ûf wâgen und ûf rossen zuo
beide spâte unde fruo
in Lemberslindes vater hûs. (1470-1477)

The wedding itself, with the boorish behaviour of Gotelind and Lemberslind during the betrothal ceremony and the peasants' humorous aping of noble customs, serves to keep the audience entertained before the sudden beginning of the third section of the maere: "dar nâch zehant sach man komen/ den rihter selpfûnfte" (1612-1613). As the father previously warned Helmbrecht (1257-1264), the sheriff and his four men arrive to take vengeance on society's behalf.

Helmbrecht's subsequent life constitutes Wernher's last narrative passage. After the youth has been rejected by his father, the peasants, seeing that he is blind and defenceless, feel compelled to avenge the theft, rape and attempted murder for which he has been responsible (1827-1876). They destroy

his cap (1886-1900) and, after administering the sacrament of earth communion to preserve the sinner from the fires of hell (1904-1908), hang him from a tree (1909). Each of Wernher's narrative excursions, therefore, reinforces the theme of gradualism. In addition, most of them are connected incidentally with obedience to the Fourth Commandment and entertain the reader.

Once the maere is over, the colophon, a didactic appendage to it, first warns all children to obey their parents (1913-1922), and, secondly, advises that overly ambitious copies of Helmbrecht, who upset gradualistic society, will, like Helmbrecht, eventually be hanged (1923-1930). The last four lines of the poem (1931-1934), a common formula in mediaeval literature, are separated from the rest of Meier Helmbrecht.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Meier Helmbrecht, which may appear on the surface to be a relatively simple poem, is actually the work of a creative artist with great insight into the problems of his own time and into human nature in general. First and foremost, Meier Helmbrecht is an exemplification of the dire consequences of leaving the social order into which one is born. For a particular setting, Wernher der Gartenaere chose the milieu in which he was living, namely the latter half of the thirteenth century in Germany. Gradualism, once the greatest stabilizing factor in mediaeval society, was decaying at this time and leaving no replacement in its wake. As a result, all orders of society, ecclesiastical and secular, were in a state of turmoil.

Wernher uses the specific case of a peasant-qua-knight, young Helmbrecht, to illustrate the effects created by one individual who leaves his social order. When the presumptuous youth rejects the honourable, but strenuous and aesthetically displeasing, labour of the farm for the decadent court, where he can live a refined and easy life by stealing from his fellow peasants, he destroys the fibre of society from within two different classes. First of all, he does not fulfil his duties as a peasant and, secondly, he adds to the crimes committed by an already corrupt knighthood. One year of

wandering about the countryside in a blind and mutilated state, before he is hanged by his peers, constitutes society's retribution. Symbolically, his rise and fall is reflected by an ornate cap, made for him by a nun before he sets out for the court and destroyed by the peasants just before he is hanged. Order, which is disrupted by Helmbrecht's knightly aspirations, as symbolized by the cap, is restored as soon as the cap is torn to shreds and the youth is dead. In the latter half of the moral, Wernher states plainly what the negative example of young Helmbrecht is to illustrate. Then and only then is the reader fully aware that he has been given a sermon.

Although gradualism dominates the poem, it is not the only theme. Helmbrecht, who wants to arrive at court in the high style he associates with genuine knighthood, must ask his father to buy him a horse. Because the father stresses the upholding of gradualistic society, Helmbrecht, who persists in his desire to experience courtly life, breaks the Fourth Commandment. More friction arises between father and son when Helmbrecht goes back to the farm and still refuses to comply with his father's wishes. When the situation is reversed and it is the son who needs shelter rather than the father who needs a farmhand, the elder Helmbrecht cannot yield to his emotions. Wernher expresses the general truth of this theme in the first part of the moral (1913-1918), a direct warning to all headstrong children that Helmbrecht's

fate will befall them if they disobey their parents.

Since Wernher's message was so sombre that he evidently feared its going unnoticed if cast in the usual form of homiletic literature, he employed exaggerated examples, satire, irony and parody in order to make it more palatable. This enabled him to entertain the reader, thereby capturing his attention without giving the impression of preaching a sermon. Although it may appear that amusing anecdotes play too great a role in the essentially didactic Meier Helmbrecht, one must bear in mind that each dialogue and each narrative passage reinforces the lessons Wernher is teaching on gradualism and, to a lesser extent, on the Fourth Commandment.

The maere of Meier Helmbrecht is divided into three parts. In the first section, Helmbrecht prepares to go to court; next his life as what he considers to be a successful robber-knight is recounted; the third and final part of the maere deals with his retribution for attempting to be more than a peasant. Dialogue, interspersed with narrative passages and pertinent comments by the poet, unifies the poem and makes it coherent. Furthermore, Helmbrecht's cap, the symbol of disorder in society, provides a framework for the entire poem. Helmbrecht's death signifies that social order, which he destroyed by going to court, is reinstated.

After he has told his story, Wernher gives the essence of the sermon he has been preaching in the entertaining maere (1913-1930). The reader can perceive, by comparing this terse colophon with the maere itself, that Meier Helmbrecht

is a literary masterpiece in its own right. Although the lessons Wernher was trying to teach were necessitated by the decadent society of the late Middle Ages, the particular way in which he taught them reflects a creative genius with a keen wit and a deep understanding of his environment. It does not matter, therefore, exactly when Wernher der Gartenaere lived, what his profession was, where the events depicted in the story occurred, or whether they took place at all. Of greatest significance is Meier Helmbrecht itself, a unique combination of social satire, preaching, and poetry, just as it has been handed down since the thirteenth century.

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